

The Alaskan Way Viaduct & Seawall Replacement Project

05.06



U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration



Washington State
Department of Transportation



City of Seattle

Frequently Asked Questions



For More Information:

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Printed 7/06

1 Why do the Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall have to be replaced?

The 53-year-old Alaskan Way Viaduct and the adjacent seawall are past their design lives, and repairs can no longer extend their usability. There is a one-in-twenty chance that the viaduct will be significantly damaged in the next earthquake. The Nisqually earthquake woke us up to the fact that the viaduct and seawall are vulnerable. WSDOT and the City of Seattle are working to ensure that the capacity that this critical north-south transportation route provides is maintained with a safe structure.

2 What are the replacement options?

There are two alternatives being considered for replacing the viaduct: a cut-and-cover tunnel or a new elevated structure. The tunnel was chosen by WSDOT, the City of Seattle, and FHWA as the preferred alternative in December 2004 as part of the environmental approval process. The elevated structure was carried forward as a contingency plan if funding for the tunnel was not secured. The 2006 State Legislature directed the City of Seattle Council to either pass an ordinance or issue an advisory ballot to help decide which alternative should be built.

For either alternative:

- The seawall will be replaced as part of the project.

- Unlike the existing viaduct, it will be designed to meet current earthquake standards.
- We face the same unique constraints during construction - very little room to work, poor soil that needs to be removed, and difficulties managing traffic.

3 What are the 'core tunnel' and 'core elevated structure' projects?

WSDOT and the City of Seattle have recently identified a 'core' project for each alternative that could be built first because it addresses the areas at greatest risk in another earthquake. It includes the south end and central waterfront sections, and initial improvements to the Battery Street Tunnel.

4 How will the project be funded?

The project currently has \$2.4 billion in-hand, from a variety of local, state, and federal sources. This includes \$220 million from the National Highway Bill and \$2 billion from the 2005 Gas Tax (Partnership Funding). With any large-scale project, funding comes in stages. WSDOT and the City of Seattle have developed a funding plan that explains what funding is already secured and identified other potential funding sources, including the City of Seattle, federal funding cycles, and local improvement districts.

5 Are the cost estimates for this project reasonable?

WSDOT has a rigorous process for determining cost and schedule estimates that accounts for risks that might otherwise cause project costs to rise over time. The projects' engineers sit down with national experts in construction and risk assessment to determine accurate cost estimates by pinpointing risks and uncertainties such as inflation, material costs, and schedule delays. Then they repeat the process each year until construction begins. For the viaduct project, cost estimates have been completed each year since 2002. Over the life of the project, this process allows the project team to focus on opportunities to reduce those risks that are the highest drivers of cost.

6 How will the project choose a construction plan?

The three lead agencies will weigh the trade-offs of various construction options to strike a balance of construction time, cost, and traffic disruptions. Public input about construction helps the project team develop an approach that reflects reasonable priorities.

7 Can you begin constructing the elevated structure now, instead of finding the money for the tunnel?

No. Both the cut-and-cover tunnel and the elevated structure are at least two years away from construction. The environmental and permitting process for both alternatives will continue until early 2008, and then utilities must be relocated before construction can begin.

8 How will the environment be affected with the alternatives?

The cut-and-cover tunnel would reduce noise levels by half in the central waterfront compared to today, making the area more pleasant for pedestrians, residents, and nearby businesses. With the elevated structure, noise would not change substantially from current noise levels. Other environmental impacts are largely the same with both of the alternatives. For air quality, the future pollutant concentrations are estimated to be below the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). Stormwater will be treated before being discharged, which will improve the water quality of runoff discharged from the project area compared with existing conditions.

9 Are the alternatives safe in an earthquake?

Yes, both alternatives are being designed to modern seismic and safety standards. In fact, structural engineers agree that tunnels are one of the safest places to be during an earthquake because the tunnel moves with the earth. Additionally, current data on global warming is being used to design both alternatives to be safe in a tsunami and protected from rising water.

10 What is included in the Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement?

The Supplemental Draft EIS updates the design for the cut-and-cover tunnel and elevated structure, including design choices for the area north of the Battery Street Tunnel. The Supplemental Draft EIS also includes three possible construction plans: shorter, intermediate, and longer. These plans could be used to build either alternative, and the Supplemental Draft EIS provides estimates on construction closure durations, which trips will likely be affected and for how long, and the type of impact that can be expected during construction, such as noise, access, and lighting.

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